

D&D Fiction

Oroon Rising, Part 9

by Ed Greenwood



Chapter 9: Mysteries and Much Pain

“The lich and the Worm That Walks stared into their scrying-spheres in utter astonishment. Brethniir’s jaw dropped.

Literally.

Luckily for the lich, it struck the edge of the table the most glancing of blows, and fell unharmed into his lap. He retrieved it hastily, muttered a swift spell to reknit the bone flanges that served it as hinges, held it in place during the eerie, tingling glow that followed, and then used it to mutter fierce words that were not incantations.

“I trust the older man most,” Jallana murmured under her breath, “but I’m the least skilled of us at judging folk. If they swing swords at me, they’re foes; beyond that, I’m lost.”

“I trust the sister,” Tarlastra muttered, staring over her two huddled companions at the unpleasantly-smiling folk at the table. They were raising their dry, dirty glasses to her now, in a mocking toast. “Lockilgar?”

“I trust none of them, but if those three choices are what we have, I want most to trust the older man, but dare not: crawling under that table puts us within their reach and at their mercy, and we’re mere dancing-animals amusement for them. I will not trust Raeladar. That leaves the sister—and that wall, in that direction only, if I recall rightly.”

“Agreed,” the two female Slayers said in unison, and they stalked forward, weapons ready.

“Spread out,” Jallana murmured, going first. “That way, a doom may take one of us, but not all of us at once.”



Some of the family seated around the table rose—silently, with not a chair moving; Tarlastra’s eyes narrowed at the sight—to stroll to where they could watch the Slayers advance.

Jallana slowed, but kept going. She was halfway to the wall when the floor opened up under her feet.

The warrior-woman's long armored arms and sword were wide-stretched, and she tried to catch herself from falling—but the flagstones she struck collapsed in turn. Snarling, she disappeared from view, trailing sparks as the metal she wore squealed and crashed on stone.

Raeladar shook his head, his smile turning to mock sorrow. "Ah, the lamentable state of trust these days. Offered a choice, you of course made the wrong one. How sad."

Lockilgar was closest to him, and sprang at Raeladar with a snarl of his own, knives flashing in his hands. Rael smiled broadly and examined his nails, reacting not in the slightest when the halfling stabbed and sliced at him.

Lockilgar's knives went through the smiling man as if through smoke, and the rest of the watching family jeered, mockingly playacting at being stabbed to the heart, and laughed at the streaking missiles of Tarlastra's furious spell.

"I'll make some of you laugh out the backsides of yer throats before I'm done, by all the Gods," the dwarf snarled, her teeth sunk so deep into her pipe that it seemed glued to her mouth. "See if I don't!"

"Who are they?" Brethniir of the Brazen Tower demanded, bringing his bony fists down on the table in fresh exasperation.

Kadareth ignored the whirr of small bone fragments scattering in all directions, and shook his head. "How by all the jeering Gods should I know?"

The shaft wasn't all that deep. Jallana barely had time to wince and clench her teeth from her armor-shrieking ricochets off the hard, rushing stone walls before she fell out into nothingness—and almost instantly through something that tore as readily as a giant spiderweb, filling the air around her with dust as she fell through it, down onto...

a bed larger than some wagons she'd seen, that held dusty ruined remnants of linens and pillows, and amid them two human skeletons lying nose-to-nose in a loving embrace.

Jallana had just time to take in what she was staring at before her boots crashed through the bed and slammed hard into a stone floor beneath, jolting her in every joint. Then she was staggering forward, amid the deafening sigh of the huge canopied bed entirely vanishing around her, skeletons and all, into a roiling cloud of choking dust.

Coughing, she tried to win free of the cloud, waving her sword in front of her like a blind beggar's stick to find any walls or waiting perils. Her sword tip found nothing.

It seemed to Jallana that she stumbled a long way before the dust thinned, and she found herself in a large

room with a high, vaulted stone ceiling that glowed faintly so that she could dimly see her surroundings. She peered in all directions, turning—in time to spot something looming up out of the dust behind her!

It started to cough as it came staggering forward, and waved an irritable and familiar stubby-fingered hand at her as it went on coughing and clutching at its throat with another. Tarlastra!

The dwarf mage's gown, nose, and eyebrows were covered in thick gray dust, and she'd lost her pipe somewhere. Still coughing, she lurched past Jallana, beckoning the warrior-woman to follow with a sweeping wave of her arm, and heading for a dark alcove where the high ceiling drew down low, forming a seemingly-forgotten crawlspace.

Where she stopped, she peered at the low ceiling, grunted in satisfaction, and reached up to do something to the stone tiles—and then cradled a slab as large as Jallana's long-lost shield, as it fell into her hands. Grunting, Tarlastra set it down carefully on the floor. Straightening with a sigh, she stepped forward and hauled herself up through the hole, out of sight.

"Tarla?" Jallana asked the mage's disappearing boots. "Should I follow you?"

Her reply was a fresh outbreak of coughing, that rose into a reappearance of her friend just long enough for another beckoning wave.

Tarlastra turned around again in a flurry of boots, and Jallana peered into the hole. She was looking up into a passage, faintly lit from somewhere above and behind her, but her friend—at least, by the sounds of breathing and crawling—was heading forward into the darkness.

Jallana probed up cautiously with her sword, discovering what she'd expected: the tunnel was too small to swing it. With a sigh she sheathed it, slapped her hand to the hilt of her dagger to make sure it was there and ready, and then hauled herself into the tunnel.

The sighing of breath and whisper of cloth ahead of her had stopped, handing her only silence.

"Tarla?" Jallana asked the darkness in low-voiced caution. "Tarla?"

She crawled forward a little way, risking a look back. The light was coming from a faintly glowing area—magic—of the tunnel ceiling, that otherwise looked no different than the stones around it. The tunnel was of smooth, cold stone, damp rather than dusty, and looked deserted.

She turned back to the darkness, and felt her way forward. Had Lockilgar fallen, fighting the folk at the table, or... ?

There was a faint—a very faint—breeze on her cheek, coming from somewhere ahead, and Jallana sensed more than saw the walls opening ahead of her into some sort of room. A big one. She crawled to the mouth of the tunnel, and tried to peer ahead into the dark, silent emptiness.

"Tarla?"

The flagstones under her knees gave, just a little, and before Jallana could even begin to curse and hurl herself

back, there came a sudden rattle in the walls—and pain, cold and searing pain, as war-steel thrust out of the stones and into her!

Jallana gasped, sobbing for breath. An eerie blue radiance—magic, again—was blossoming around her, fleeing from the blades that had transfixed her like smoke. By its fast-fleeing light she saw that the magic had melted her armor at a touch, in great holes through which the oldest, rustiest broadsword blades she'd seen in many a year had thrust, deep into her.

Six of them, through her flank, belly, shoulder... thigh. More pain than she could ever remember feeling, in all her battles and deaths, raw red pain that made Jallana whimper.

Wetness was filling her up from within, and she was trembling in agony, frozen in her crawl hanging on the blades that were killing her. All she could do was hang from them and gaze through her tears at Tarlastra, who was coming back to her now wearing an unfriendly smile.

A many-fanged smile, that widened as her friend's face started to droop, melting like a fast-blazing candle. Then Tarlastra's body started to really change, and Jallana could do nothing but whimper and watch, as those fangs grew longer... and nearer. Reaching for her throat almost lovingly... longer... nearer...